

"Sugarcoal"

(excerpt)

By Peter Kovic

The steward woke me and spoke gibberish. Then he looked at my ticket stub and translated what he said into "Mont-Wittgenstadt." Passengers were coming and going. I looked outside, then back at the steward.

"This is a mistake," I said.

"This is Mont-Wittgenstadt," he asserted over his shoulder.

In my shock I got lost immediately. It was like part of Triaplak had sat on Mont-Wittgenstadt.

Everything used to lead to the university on the soft rise in the heart of town. Now there is no edge and no center. The factories, with their gates and fences and brick buildings, had been assembled so frantically that their smokestacks teetered and the streets connecting them were senseless, deadend zig-zags. Canals built to accommodate miles of new buildings clashed with each other - a dozen builders ignoring the work of one another - resulting in black standing pools and too-fast torrents that overflowed into the streets.

What happened to the gentle labyrinths of low, colorful houses and cobblestone streets too narrow for horses? I wandered

open-mouthed as strange accents yelled for me to get out of the way of carts and carriages. Railroad tracks crossed each other and ran on elevated platforms, some assembled with such shoddiness that they had already collapsed and been forgotten and built anew elsewhere.

When I was a student you could go up and down the streets for hours and hear nothing louder than footsteps, pages turning, or the distant clop-clop-clop of a horse coming into town, as if the stones themselves soaked sound out of the air. Now everyone shouted to be heard over steam engines, wagon wheels, train whistles, and the grinding that came from the black-cloud belching stone factories. Was Monsieur Franck's alchemy taking place within those walls? I stopped for directions. No one understood me.

I remembered wandering the cobblestone as a boy, being passed by pudgy monks debating in Latin whispers. They never agreed on anything - not botany, theology, the moon or the stars - except that every debate went smoother with beer. Now I heard a dozen tongues on the street alone. The gravity of this monstrosity had sucked the starving peasant men into its factories and their families into shaky stone towers whose windows were alive with drying laundry or emptying chamberpots. I was pushed out of the way just before a steaming waterfall of feces and the useless bits of vegetables came down from a high window.

The deeper I got into the city, the more coppery the sky became. Every time I threw up my hands in defeat, some remnant of the old town appeared for me to find my way. A wooden street sign on its side. A bookstore, closed and boarded up but still recognizable. A once-creamy statue on a streetcorner, blackened. I blew my nose in a handkerchief. What came out was black too.

I went into a tavern for directions and hot mead and stayed longer than I meant to. I addressed my lifestory to men who couldn't understand me. The only parts of them not smeared in soot were the outlines of their goggles. They nodded while I spoke.

The old dormitory was torn down to make way for an aqueduct that had already fallen apart and been replaced by a mill. The new dormitory was a loud stone tower where a monk sat by the door, copying a gospel by hand. He said Andrejcek was six floors up. I rode in an elevator whose pulleys were powered by sweaty boys with enormous arms.

Years ago we had a wind-up phonograph in the castle but had sold the parts after it stopped working. Now we listened to one Andrejcek had been given by a classmate, louder and clearer than the player we had sold.

"Everyone needs a record-player here," he asserted. "To drown out the noise. It has to be just as loud or even louder, because then it's a consistent sound, and you have a chance of thinking clearly."

We sat and drank and I smiled. He had pet theories about everything, all of them juvenile nonsense. He had decided to be irritated by a lot of things around him because he thought it made him sophisticated or discriminating. He had made friendships that were obviously doomed. I liked to see him depressed over a girl he wasn't going to tell me about. His periodic refrain was "nothing really matters though." And I replied with "of course" every time.

I asked if he was learning all the languages that had come to Mont-Wittgenstadt. He told me about them. I marveled that I could have ever been so young.

If I asked where he came from he would say he is the product of his choices and the controller of his own destiny. But I know no one makes himself. I am prouder of my lazy son than if he were a genius. Anyone can make the right decisions. If we set aside everything save the truth and the facts, all roads lead to the same place. Bad decisions say what kind of man you are. Good decisions make us automatons. I don't need Andrejcek to like me. I'm not convinced that he does.

"Don't you have to meet the R&F people?"

"There's no hurry."